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Bare

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Bare

There was a splash in the dark. The black water burst into life. Supple and milky forms displaced the malleable liquid, taking up space that was not theirs to take. Calloused toes on the wooden boards. Surrendering to splinters. Quinn saw them in the film of moonlight, their skin reflecting its whiteness, bobbing above the surface. She flinched as the spray dotted her face, and a whelp ballooned from her mouth as though the water seared through her flesh.

Someone was bounding up behind her, shaking the dock under their bone-heavy weight. It was Nessie. She was halfway done stripping away her college sweater, her amber stomach baring, shadowed by the arms raised above her head. The stud in her navel glimmered like the moon wavering on the water.

At first she found herself staring, but when Nessie unhooked her bra, Quinn turned away and slapped her hands over her eyes.

“Oh, God!” Her voice shot up through octaves, as if a stereo dial had been turned up. A lone siren, Krista, cheered and Quinn heard another splash. There was laughter. She suddenly felt left out; what had she missed? Peeking out from between her fingers, she found herself alone on the dock. She took a step forward and her foot became tangled in a pair of denim shorts, still warm. The previous wearer certainly was no longer so warm.

“It’s so cold!” A voice, probably Nessie, cackled. It echoed across the water, seemingly hollow as it filled the abandoned boats tied to their moorings and called back to the loon that cried out in the distance. Teeth chattered like dragonfly wings.

Quinn held her arms close to her body and leaned her chin against her fists. Even from up on the dock, it was chilly.

Nessie called out from somewhere in the murk, "Come in, Quinn! It's nice!"

Krista chimed in agreement. "The water's great! It's so liberating!"

This time, she wasn't going to fall for it. Quinn had learned a few things since the girls tricked her into watching *The Shining*. "It isn't scary at all," Nessie had said. "It's about Jack Nicholson and his family that gets to stay in this fancy hotel all by themselves in the winter." Yeah, okay.

Well, maybe she was being unfair. Nessie could also drink six shots of tequila and not feel a thing, and had once tried to convince Quinn that she wouldn't get drunk. But there was no way she would fall for that nonsense a second time. Krista wouldn't get another chance to grab her leg and make her think that it was a creepy ghost girl or a lake monster like she had the previous summer. Tonight, Quinn would stick up for herself.

Pressed against her wrists, her small breasts asserted their presence. Frankly, though, a rather unimpressive one. She looked down, contemplating, and her thighs seemed to inflate. As though she had quite literally soaked up the sun while swimming earlier in the day. She could probably fit both Nessie and Krista's legs inside her own. *That's stupid*, she thought. *I'm being stupid*. Even she knew that she was small.

Giggling jingled like bells on the water and coaxed her in its warm and throaty transformation beneath the dock.

Despite her shielding hands, she had seen Krista naked. She hadn't been quite ready for that. The gravity of Krista's C cup breasts and her post-dinner bulging stomach. Her long legs and rounded rear. Quinn couldn't bring herself to even think the word *buttocks*. It felt profane.

A hand gripped onto the edge of the dock. With one thrust, Nessie's face jolted up into sight. Her dark hair hung in straggles at her cheeks, sticking to the skin and framing its shape. Her mascara was running; perhaps she had forgotten about it. But, Quinn thought, she probably didn't even care. It was like an ink-spill dripping down paper.

Now hanging onto the edge of the dock by her elbows, Nessie rested her head in her arms. "Come on, Quinn. It's really nice. You'll regret it if you don't," she murmured.

Quinn shook her head. "Nope. I definitely won't."

"How often do you get the chance to do this, though?" Nessie groaned. Lifting one of her arms, she gestured out to the open water, the infinity of the dark. It stretched endlessly and melted up into the stars.

"It's not something I've ever wanted to do," Quinn retorted, averting her eyes in case she accidentally caught another glimpse of her friend's bare body. Instead, she focused on the red light blinking on the dock across the lake; she felt like Gatsby. They'd read the novel last year in English class and she had

daydreamed about that light at the end of the dock calling out to her. But where was her Daisy? And more importantly, who?

A distant voice shouted, "Get in the water!" It took her a moment to hone in on the iceberg shape bobbing up and down beside the speedboat they had earlier tethered more than a hundred feet out. She could barely make out Krista's face in the dark, tucked under the Lake Placid baseball cap she insisted on wearing. Echoing across the water came the sounds of her palm-slap splashes. The spray didn't reach them at the dock, but Quinn and Nessie shared a knowing glance; Krista was pretending to be a mermaid. She was probably flailing around, her legs flexed firmly together, using her core to wiggle her way through the water.

The summer Quinn's parents took her to Cape May, the tide had been coming in hard, the undertow sweeping grown men off their feet. The sea claimed her victims, if only for a short while. Or at least until the lifeguards were able to haul a water-logged nose-dripping shut-eyed sputtering boy back to shore and ascertain that the greatest harm was a sand-burn on his elbow. The sun was hot on Quinn's scalp, burning the hairline that divided her left and right brain. She waded into the water, toes first, and allowed herself time to grow accustomed to the cold; meanwhile, watching the gulls streak across the sky, cawing and circling rainbow umbrellas for unwillingly given pretzels.

She hadn't eaten all morning. Her stomach growled, but she refused to oblige it. After all, it was her first time wearing a two-piece. Her mother had taken her to a local department store after her complaints of, *I'm not six anymore, Mom. I'm thirteen. I'm old enough to wear a bikini.* To her father's dismay, her mother had admitted that she had a point. They had spent three hours combing the racks—she remembered the metallic whoosh of the hangers on the poles—and getting lost in sequined bodices and ruffled skorts. Flimsy pinks. Navy stripes. Tops meant to hold far more than she could give, and subsequent gaps. Finally, her mother had unearthed a simple white ensemble between the lumpy sweaters and distressed jeans on the clearance rack. Bright orange signs: 50% off all items. By some stroke of fate, her mother thought to toss it over the door of the dressing room, whose floor had become a toxic neon wasteland of ill-fitting suits. Begrudgingly, Quinn had slipped it over her head, not expecting the feelings that were to transpire as she had gazed at her reflection in the floor-length mirror. That was it. She was ready.

She had been so excited to show off to the other beachgoers. Like a movie, she had expected the toned and tanned lifeguards to turn their heads and stare, slack-jawed, as she glowed in the sunlight. Boys would be starstruck. Girls would shoot envious glares and, not watching where they were going, fall into some kid's sandcastle moat.

Standing at the edge of the sea, she felt triumphant. She imagined that she looked just like a young Marilyn Monroe. Proud, she popped a hip and puffed out her chest, her hands resting firmly on her hipbones.

She fingered the hem of her sweatshirt.

If she didn't do it, then what? She'd be the uncool one. Not only stupid, but uncool. She hated the sensation of being left out; that was why she had followed them down to the dock in the first place, why she hadn't sprinted back up into the closed-door shelter of the house when Krista started to strip. It was clear for weeks that Nessie had begun to give up on her. Even before they got to the lake house, Nessie hadn't had really anything to say to her; the words were always saved for Krista. Since her two friends had joined cross country without her, Quinn hadn't seen them much. She would be sitting in the library, poring over her biology textbook, and they would pass by, arm in arm, in their team shirts, not remotely aware of her presence. Most of the time, even when they all were together, she felt like a third wheel, an eavesdropper.

Nessie was starting to create space between herself and the dock, making circles with her arms in the water and submerging the back of her head, letting her dark hair fan out behind her. Maybe she was just trying to stay warm. But to Quinn, it felt like abandonment. And Krista? Krista was spinning around in circles as fast as she could out by the speedboat; Quinn could hear her splash and giggle. But she couldn't see much further than an arm's length away.

That day in Cape May, she'd been gazing out at the wave-crests, how they sparkled under the sunlight and reflected silver into the sky, paying no attention to the body-surfers or the toddler chasing the gulls in the wet sand. She hadn't noticed the wolf pack patrolling the shoreline either, some in aviators, too cool to look anyone in the eye. A boy at the front, though, looked straight at her. Smiling, she had batted her eyelashes. It was a good thing she bought waterproof mascara instead of regular. She imagined her lashes long, black, and beautiful. That she felt them dusting her cheeks they were so long.

His eyes fell to her midriff and he snorted, "Put it away!" His groupies laughed and that stupid grin blotted out the sun and stripped her of her budding confidence. "Disgusting," he muttered to the boy nearest to him. Now red-faced, Quinn folded in on herself, enveloping her bare stomach with her arms, her neck craning down to throw her gaze into the broken shells at her feet. It wasn't even that he was that good-looking, because he wasn't. He had that sort of sneering face you never forget after it has tainted you. But he had seemed fairly popular. The sheer size of his group told her that. And as they

had passed by, chuckling, he'd greeted some other girls by name. He'd then turned the pack in a sharp 180 and followed the girls down the shoreline. He was just an asshole, she had tried to tell herself.

But that hadn't stopped her from crying into a lumpy hotel pillow that night.

She was getting angry, her face flushing with either fury or the chill. And then she couldn't take it anymore. Fuck them. With one swift huff, muttering under her breath, she threw the shirt up over her head. In the coolness of the night, she paused and let the darkness slip into the gap between her bra and chest; it buried itself in her breastbone. She unclasped her bra with a struggle. She was so anxious, her hands fumbled behind her back. After a moment, it dropped to the ground with a thud. All that A cup padding.

"Yes!" Nessie exclaimed, drawing out the vowel so that it rang in the air, bouncing off of the mosquitoes.

The loon called back, though none of them paid it any mind.

Hearing this, Krista must have turned, and began hooting and splashing out in the dark. She probably jerked her body around too quickly, Quinn noted, because a whisper of "shit, my hat" hung faintly in the humidity.

Once she stepped out of her shorts and they lay in a clump at her feet, she stood for a moment, breathless. Her arms had instinctively risen to censor her breasts. It felt like a breach of contract to expose them. Why did this feel so wrong? *They're just boobs*, she thought, looking down at what lay pressed beneath her wrists.

"Damn, Quinn!" Krista was laughing. But Quinn could hear the chill on her tongue. If she waited too long, the girls would get too cold and abandon the adventure. Then what? She wouldn't have done it. She'd have missed out again.

Nessie backed away from the dock, her lungs constricting, and murmured, "You got this, Quinn. You're gonna love it."

Nessie's words ringing in her head, Quinn took one deep inhale and felt it inflate her stomach. She noticed the muscles expand. Her arms fell to her sides, bouncing off of her hipbones. Then she swept them up over her head and propelled herself off the dock. As her body sliced through the still water, she heard the vibrations of the girls cheering. She broke out in a smile. Quickly, though, she squeezed her lips shut as her lungs filled with algae-crustad lakewater.

Rising to the surface, she felt free and also swaddled. No elastic tight around her waist or underwire digging into her flesh. Water flowed boundless into all of the cracks and crevices of her skin, the clefts in her body always untouched by light or air. Water—cold and bracing.

She looked down at her milky thighs and memorized the way they became marbled in the dark, the way the moon mirrored and liquidized platinum on her wetted shoulders. Her freckles seemed to have disappeared; perhaps they dove out into the darkness. The hinges of her fingers closed around the stilled current, which escaped as she tightened her grasp. For the first time in years, she let her stomach hang untaut.

Her face turned up to bask in the moonbeams, ears submerged. The world silenced.

The still water made her feel immense. The boundaries of her body disintegrated and fused with the liquid molecules, dark and stretching far to the tree-dotted shoreline across the lake where the Gatsby light flickered and downstream under the village bridge. The water wasn't freezing, as she had feared. She was awake, alive.

Suddenly, a shout a couple docks over. A call and response. It was a tangle of male voices, deep and impulsive. The beauty of the night shattered in an instant as everything became illuminated by a bright pit of flames. The light flecked the water and stretched across the deep expanse.

Quinn let out a squeak, held her arms against her chest, and let herself sink into the shield of the lake. The surface reflected the light, making what lay beneath it invisible to the group of boys hollering into the embers.

Realizing that she had been holding her breath, Quinn exhaled. How would they get back out, now, unseen?

Krista had begun to swim toward the boys and their fire. "Hi!" She shouted, waving her arms above her head. Did she think they could really see her? Quinn wondered. They called back a greeting, among the sound of rattling cans and plastic bags. Their discombobulated jumbling and poorly disguised whispers sliced through the air: definitely not the smooth type. Krista called back to them, "Are you guys roasting marshmallows?"

Quinn wanted to disappear. This was bad. This was stupid. What if these boys were drunk already, or in a gang, or rapists? It wasn't like she and her friends had weapons to protect themselves out in the lake. Like, what, a stick? Shine a cell phone flashlight in their eyes? Krista was naked, for crying out loud!

"Krista, stop!" She hissed. But she was drowned out by a chorus of "nah" and "no" and low chuckles that skipped across the water like flat and jagged rocks.

It was just a bit too long before the boys realized their fatal mistake; Krista was already making her way back toward the dock when they screeched, "Unless you want us to."

Nessie snorted, "Not even in your dreams." At this, probably too quiet for them to even hear it, Quinn snickered. She watched Krista float on her back, her rounded stomach arched toward the moon, filled with the s'mores they'd made earlier. Nessie grumbled, "Perverts."

Quinn hadn't been in the water long, but now her bones felt the cold. The water seeping into her skin was solidifying into a thin ice. Instinctively, she bobbed closer toward Krista, whose thick and muscular limbs were spread wide. It seemed as though she was trying to take up as much room as she possibly could. "Krista, how are you not freezing?" The words bounced off her uncontrollably chattering teeth.

"You're cold because you're tiny, Quinn. I've got more," Krista gestured to her torso, circling the water about with her arms. "You know, more matter."

Nessie seemed to appear out of nowhere, wading up to them. "You're not fat, Krista, god," she breathed, exasperated.

Throwing her head back, Krista raised her voice. "I never said that. All I said was I stay warm 'cause I've got more body, more insulation, that's all."

Krista was right. There was something beautiful in the roundness of her face, as though her cheeks were full of life, spiritedness brought out by the sugar in the marshmallows, directed out at them through her large, bright eyes.

Quinn wished the boys would vanish, be swept away in a sudden fantastic tidal wave, their crude fire extinguished to allow the shadows to pool and protect her.

But, of course, the boys were still there. They were talking, their voices piercing the quiet of the nightwater.

"We're gonna come over!" One shouted.

Cupping her hands around her mouth like a megaphone, Krista yelled back, "You better not!"

The other boys seemed to rally around their leader and began to whoop and holler. "Let's go!" It seemed that they were about to make their way over. Quinn felt herself panicking. Shallow breath in deep water. Shit. She couldn't decide between hurrying back to the dock and running off with her clothes or swimming further out until nobody could reach her. To dissolve into the night, what bliss.

Nessie's voice, for a moment, took on the depth of her heavy-set, feast-preparing mother as she declared, "This is a private party. Sorry, kids."

Quinn wasn't convinced that this would prevent the drunken boys from invading their dock. And yet, the offenders quieted for a moment. She could no longer hear their laughter or chatter. All that was left was the splash Krista

made with her feet and the empty whistling of the loon. The water dashed against the legs of the dock, running up over the rocks on the shore and falling down in between the cracks; a piece of lake-kelp tossed across a boulder, stranded. Quinn could imagine it slowly drying up like a maple leaf in October.

Nessie was shivering now, too, her teeth audibly crashing into one another; Quinn sunk her ears beneath the water so she couldn't hear it anymore. Damn, it was cold. Her skin bubbled into goosebumps. Holding her fingers up to her eyes, she found only prunes: sunken, salted, and dried.

"I think I'm gonna get out. I love you guys, but I don't want to run into any boys like this," Nessie mumbled, kissing the water. As she waded toward the dock, an arm shot out between them.

Krista came barreling past them, reaching for the metal ladder. "Scuse me! I'm not dealing with any fucking boys right now!" In one thrust, she rose out of the water up into the air, heavy with waterweight.

She fumbled on the dock for her clothes, her body perceptibly dripping onto everything. Meanwhile, Nessie laughed at Quinn's hiding her eyes behind a curtain of scraggly-wet hair.

Although the fire still burned in the boys' pit, she couldn't discern the silhouettes of their bodies, the profiles of what she assumed were their pock-marked faces. They could be anywhere. They could be hiding in the bushes at the top of the dock just between the rocks and the kayaks, camouflaged in peat. They could have climbed up the trees and were waiting to ambush. They could even be swimming in her direction at that very moment, silent as sharks. There was no justification she could find in herself to climb out of the water. She had gotten herself in; but now, there was the issue of getting out.

"Come on, Quinn!" In that short moment, she found that Nessie had already pulled herself out of the water and grabbed a handful of clothing from the dock. She was curled over it, shivering, and glancing back at the shore where Krista's shape was pounding up toward the shelter of the house. "Before those guys come!"

Quinn began to paddle toward the dock as if there were actually a lake monster behind her. With each stroke she breathed, "Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit."

"Quinn, I can hear them," Nessie hissed as Quinn grabbed onto the metal ladder. "I think they're walking through the trees." Quinn froze with one foot on the ladder to listen. Yes, Nessie was right. Their attempted whispers were carrying across the water, feet crunching on old leaves and fallen sticks. As fast as she had ever moved, cracking the layer of ice around her lungs, she heaved herself out of the water, scooped up her clothes, and began to run with Nessie up the dock and toward the house. Two naked girls sprinting in the dark, water dripping silver from their bodies in the moonlight. The closer to the house they got, the safer Quinn felt. Warm in the glow of the porch light on

her face. As the door slammed behind them, numb-cold feet on carpet, they stopped. Somewhere deeper inside, they could hear Krista cackling.

Eyes still full of moonwater, they looked at each other. And laughed. They were safe now, together.